

“Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator?”

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AP English Literature

45 class minutes for most activities

## Summary:

This short story tells the story of a protagonist who experiences a very bad day. It starts when he breaks his razor and can only shave ½ of his face. The elevator does not come, so he races downstairs where he spies a poor man stuck in the elevator. He promises to send someone, but does not due to many errors and his desire to reach work to make an important presentation about toilet paper usage. There are a series of snafus that prevent him from reaching work: forgotten wallet, bus accident, another bus ride where he is accused of improper touching, a 30 minute walk to his work, and another broken elevator with a woman who is suspicious of him. Finally, he is released from the elevator minus his shoes, covered in grime, and ½ shaven. Nevertheless, he makes his presentation to group of argumentative, distrustful employees who find his plan lacking. At several points in the story, he tries to report the man stuck in the elevator only to meet official indifference or inaction. Finally, the day ends, and once again he is in an elevator in the building where he lives. He tells the occupants about the man he saw stuck in the elevator and asks if anyone else saw this. The people do not respond, eyed him suspiciously, and hurry off the elevator. The narrator goes to his apartment, jumps in the shower, and is hit with cold water. When he complains, the guard tells him the notice has been posted for weeks and hangs up on him. He is left wondering what happened to the guy stuck in the elevator. Although humorous, the short story portrays life in an urban environment as isolating, rapid paced, and meaningless.

## Historical/Literary Context:

The author Kim Young Ha, 44, was born in 1968, the year of the Korean Olympics. Currently he lives in New York, and his writings reflect the post-modern angst of young people in Korea. “I wanted to talk about the young people today who stand in a desolate tunnel where the exit is not easily found” (Standaert). In 2004 he won three of the most prestigious literary prizes awarded in Korea. His first novel, the prizewinning *I Have the Right to Destroy Myself*, featured a protagonist who helps people commit suicide in humane ways. However, since his marriage he describes his writing as, “less aggressive and death centered” (Standaert). The author says of his new novel that it, “deals with human identity in a capitalistic society” (Chung Ah Young). In an interview in the Koreatimes, the author says his most recent book “raises the question of human identity in a democratic and consumerist society.” He further describes South Korea as, “specialized in lifelessness and defeatism” (Yun). The author rejected the values of his father, a military man who fought in Viet Nam against the Viet Cong. He was ashamed of his father and often the verbal fights turned physical (Standaert). His struggle with his father, the fast-paced life in Seoul, and the political situation all fuel the themes found in his novels, stories, and plays.

Korea is one of the fastest growing urbanized countries with 83% of the population living in cities (CIA). This growth brought pollution, a large economic rural/urban gap, traffic, a declining fertility rate, and crime. More than 30 South Koreans kill themselves daily; Korea has one of the highest suicide rates in the world, three times higher than the United States (McDonald). The young in particular feel the competition, especially academically. Koreans, for the third straight year, are the unhappiest young people in a subset of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Countries (McDonald). Korea’s traditional Confucian values emphasize the family over the individual, which does not give these youth a way to express their unhappiness. In the short story the first person voice, rapid pace of time, and

intrusive demands all give voice to the tinder box of living in a faceless city filled with cold, uncaring people.

### Discussion Questions and Answers:

1. How does the first person point of view contribute to the readers' involvement with the story?

**Possible answers:** *By confining the reader in the mind of the protagonist, one feels claustrophobic and rushed. The reader only understands the story through the narrator, so cannot independently evaluate responses and reactions of other character. Additionally, the author opens the story with the narrator addressing "you." This feels like the protagonist is telling the reader the story, which places the reader on the side of the narrator. As the story continues, the reader finds the protagonist a callow, facile person with a weak moral code. Generally, most readers would not want to identify or support the main character, yet due to the narrative style, it reads uncomfortably as if we are supporting him.*

2. Elevators feature prominently in this story. What might they symbolize?

**Possible Answers:** *Disabled elevators show how life in a mechanistic society can go awry. Several times the narrator becomes stuck or the elevators fail to work properly, which disrupts his schedule, throws him into a small space with suspicious people, and of course, the title shows that elevator malfunctions happen to many people. Elevators are small, confined boxes, where people often try not to make eye contact. Yet, when they are disabled, strangers must cooperate and communicate to solve the problem. However, in this story, the people cooperate reluctantly and often flee contact as soon as possible. The elevators may serve as a microcosm of a society where the people feel boxed in suffering from the whims of modern technology.*

3. Discuss how Confucian philosophy might conflict with life modern, crowded cities.

**Possible Answers:** *Koreans place a great emphasis on relationships not individuals. In Confucianism, a person does not exist autonomously. The links between people order their society. Therefore, they often do not use the pronoun "you" because they will tend to use the relationship, such as "teacher," or "elder brother," which define their interactions with each other. Hence, when in a crowded city bumping into and interacting with strangers, Koreans' reactions are apt to be cold and unfeeling. Not because they are cruel people, but they are operating out of their organizational model. Additionally, lonely individuals who are suffering tend to ignore their feelings leading to further sadness. The isolated narrator in this story desperately calls for help, only to be rebuffed or met with suspicion because others do not have a relationship with him. On page 27, the narrator asks others in the elevator if any of them know about the guy stuck in the elevator. No one responds.*

4. List several missteps/accidents that add to the humor and pathos in the story?

**Possible Answers:** *In the opening page the narrator breaks his razor causing him to leave his apartment with only 1/2 of his face shaved. On the second page, he realizes that he does not have his wallet, so he cannot pay for the bus. While he is arguing with the bus driver, the bus is hit by a marauding dump truck. An hour later on another bus, he is accused of feeling up a woman. He*

*exits the bus and realizes that he has a 30 minute walk to his office, where he is late to give a presentation. When he reaches his office, he is stranded on another broken elevator with a fearful and suspicious woman. The story continues with the narrator covered in grime, missing his shoes, and ½ shaved. Of course, he must go in and make his presentation.*

5. There are two small examples of the hierarchal nature of Korean society, please describe.

**Possible Answers:** *One page 20, the narrator says that there are six elevators, but one is the private elevator of the CEO. The employees use five others. The details allow one to assume that the company is large, and it seems ridiculous to reserve an elevator for one person. Additionally, when the protagonist is accused of touching the behind of a woman on the bus, she turns and says, “Do you know who my brother is?” (20) This also is ridiculous since the bus is filled with strangers going to work. These details emphasize the lower rank of the protagonist.*

6. The narrator’s big presentation and central job is to reduce toilet paper usage. What does this task tell us about the narrator and his society?

**Possible Answers:** *The narrator’s job is clearly one for a low person in the company. No firm is going to suffer due to excess toilet paper usage. The “ick” factor combined with the protagonist’s solemnity about his task add humor, but also show his lack of consciousness about the meaningless nature of his job. He takes surveys, makes computations, and presents his ideas with great seriousness. Ironically, the division and department heads, a person from the board of trustees, and numerous others are involved with this presentation. This demonstrates the author’s disdain for a contemporary, capitalist society. Talented humans waste their time discussing, --well, waste.*

7. In the first two pages, the narrator repeatedly says that there is nothing he can do about several situations. What does this tell us about his character and values?

**Possible Answers:** *He protests too much. The first time he says this is when he sees the guy stuck in the elevator. However, he also says “But, I had neither the energy nor the time to pull him out.” This is closer to the truth. He does go down to find a security guard, but when he can’t find one, he again says there is nothing he can do. The character’s facile excuse seems to be a pattern. He could have been more humane, and his constant discussion of this person during the day shows he may feel some guilt for his inactions. This also may say something about the society because this unwillingness to help others in trouble repeatedly is shown by other characters. The author finds the crowded, fast-paced city to be a callous place where no one cares for those who are suffering.*

8. There are several instances of a leering, disrespectful attitude toward women in this story by the narrator. What does this tell us about the narrator and his society?

**Possible Answers:** *When the narrator is caught in the elevator with a young woman who works in his company, he notices that she has beautiful long hair. He also wonders why married women cut their hair. In older times, women cut their hair to show they are married and have to care for the family. Today, women cut their hair because it is often easier to manage when working full time and caring for a family. When the elevator stops between floors, they are awkwardly thrown*

together to fix their problem. He proceeds to tell her the story of being thrown off the bus because of the accusation of improper touching. She becomes suspicious. The narrator goes on to stare at her breasts and look up her skirt. When the woman escapes, she does not send for help for the narrator as punishment for his actions. However, he does not understand this. This is ironic because when he witnessed the same behavior on the bus, he said he was angry about it. Yet, he behaves in the same manner. Many of the women exhibit suspicions about interactions with strangers, which reflects the daily harassment they receive.

**9. What do the references to time give to the story?**


**Possible Answers:** The narrator notes the time often during the story. This gives a sense of urgency to the text. The narrator rushes to try and reach work so he can give his presentation. By noting the rapid passing of time, the reader joins this rush. Time also speeds when one is late or disorganized. The citizens in this packed city all appear to rush. For example, when the bus crashes everyone pulls out a cellphone to contact someone. The crowds are “huge” and there are “lines” for everything. All of these details add to the sense of urgency to reach work on time. The city is not a place for those who love leisure; it is filled with people hurrying, pushing, crowding to accomplish their personal goals.


**10. Discuss possible themes found in this story.**

**Possible Answers:** The meaning of the work as a whole identifies urbanization as dehumanizing, chaotic, and meaningless. The pace of life is relentless, and many humans feel isolated, jostled, and dissatisfied. Suspicious of strangers, in a world where everyone is a stranger, the citizens flee from intimacy and their interactions are rude, cold, and uncivil. Capitalism rules encase workers in meaningless work, where humans spend their time and energy on tasks guaranteed to be soul killing. The author states his sympathy for those in their 20's who “stand in a desolate tunnel where the exit is not easily found.” Mirroring this story, the author's reference to a tunnel is suffocating and endless. The frame of the question, “What ever happened to that guy in the elevator?” shows the circular nature of urban existence and the never-ending absurdity of life in Korean cities.


**Activities:**


Below I have listed some possible activities I would use with this short story. The first is the most difficult. The “most important sentence” and “gallery walk” can be used in any level. Generally, the only materials they will use in class are copies of the story.

 **Visual Thematic Connections:** My class is Advanced Placement, so they would have a week to compose this essay. Directions: Choose from one of the pictures found in Appendix A, B, C, or D. Write an essay discussing how the meaning of the work as a whole is reflected in the art. The essay should be no more than two typed pages double spaced.

 **The Most Important Sentence:** Divide the class into groups of four or five. Have them chose the most important line from the story. Give 10 minutes to debate. Each group presents their idea with reasons for their choice and why it is important. The class will

vote for the best. They may not vote for their own choice. This may take up to 45 minutes.

 **Publishers Gallery Walk:** Students are told that they are going to design a cover for the book featuring this short story. As an added bonus, they are including a song for the purchaser. They are to draw or find a picture representing the short story and create a cover. The title of the song they choose will be listed on the front cover. The covers will be posted anonymously with numbers. Students will walk around and vote for their top three choices. Students will create their covers at home, and the gallery walk will be on the day they are due. It will take 30 minutes. If the students are not familiar with the songs, they may play portions of them for the class. This project is completed at home. However, if you wish to have the students complete this in class, you will need colored paper, crayons, colored pencils, scissors, and markers. You will also need computer access with a printer for students who wish to find a picture online. See Appendix F.

 **Quick “Did You Read Quiz?”** While I hate to be suspicious, this can help me work with those who did not read the story by giving them an alternate assignment, such as taking notes from the presentations, grading presentations, and creating an alternative list of questions they must answer when they do read the story. See Appendix E. I have two examples to prevent cheating. Instead of copying the tests, I give them orally. This usually takes less than 10 minutes.

### Works Cited:

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## Appendix A



*Empire of Light (L'Empire des lumières)*, 1953–54. Oil on canvas, 76 15/16 x 51 5/8 inches (195.4 x 131.2 cm). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice 76.2553.102

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/>



## Appendix B



*Living Your Life in a Goldfish Bowl*. 1985 John Alexander Born: Beaumont, Texas 1945 oil on canvas 90 1/8 x 120 in. (228.9 x 304.8 cm.). Smithsonian American Art Museum Gift of United Stationers, Inc. 1995.70.1 not currently on view

<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=34912>



Appendix C



*Rain (no. 215)*. Werner Drewes Born: Canig, Germany 1899 Died: Reston, Virginia 1985 color woodcut Smithsonian American Art Museum Gift of the artist 1968.9.62 Not currently on view <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=7422>

## Appendix D



*Morning Scene*. 1982, printed 1992 N. Jay Jaffee Born: New York, New York 1921 Died: Huntington, New York 1999 selenium-toned gelatin silver print on paper sheet: 11 x 13 7/8 in. (27.8 x 35.2 cm.) Smithsonian American Art Museum Gift of the artist 1993.16.37 not currently on view

<http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=33545>

## **Appendix E**

### **Quiz 1**

#### **Did you do the Reading Quiz?**

“Whatever Happened to the Guy Stuck in the Elevator? ”

1. In what point of view is the story told?
2. List two events that cause problems for the protagonist.
3. How does it end?
4. Create a sentence of the meaning of the work as a whole.

### **Quiz 2**

1. Give an example of a symbol found in the story.
2. Give a specific example of the treatment of women in the story.
3. Describe the setting.
4. The protagonist gives a presentation at work. What is the subject?

## **Appendix F**

### **Directions for completing cover art for short story.**

1. Please size your cover 9 ½ x 6 ¼.
2. Add a notation on the cover with the name of the song you are including inside the book.
3. Create a title for the book.
4. Be sure to highlight in some way the title of the story we are studying.
5. Make your book cover attractive and eye catching.
6. Put your name and class on the reverse of your cover.